

# If You Really Want to Know What You Mean, Read More Poetry

Fabienne Martin, Brussels

This paper is dedicated to viewpoints propositions (VPPs), a (lexically triggered) non-truth conditional component of sentences. A VPP introduced by a sentence denotes a Platonic (non necessarily embodied) viewpoint on the denotatum of this sentence. Unlike conventional implicatures, VPPs are not necessarily consciously processed by speakers and interpreters. The possibility that unconscious processing of VPPs during the utterance retroacts on thoughts is examined.

„The nominatum of a proper name is the object itself which is designated thereby; the image which we may have along with it is quite subjective; the sense lies in between, not subjective as is the image, but not the object either. The following simile may help in elucidating these relationships. Someone observes the moon through a telescope. The moon is comparable with the nominatum: it is the object of the observation which is mediated through the real image projected by the object lens into the interior of the telescope; and through the retinal image of the observer. The first may be compared with the sense, the second with the presentation (or image in the psychological sense). The real image inside the telescope, however, is relative: it depends upon the standpoint, yet, it is objective in that it can serve several observers. (...) But every one of them would have only his own retinal image“. Frege, *On Sense and Nominatum*

## 1. Introduction

Non Truth-Conditional Semantics is nearly entirely dedicated to the study of conversational or conventional implicatures. This paper explores (rather sketchily) another type of non truth-conditional semantic component of sentences. To illustrate the phenomenon, French native speakers were submitted two sentences depicting the scene of telescope viewing that Frege resorts to in the quotation above. Formally, the two sentences differ only by the preposition introducing the locative complement. Following French dictionaries, the two prepositions are synonymous; the use of the second one is more constrained and not easily translated in English:

(1) *Pierre regarde la lune à travers le télescope.*

Peter is-looking-at the moon at through the telescope.

‘Peter is looking at the moon right through the telescope’

(2) *Pierre regarde la lune au travers du télescope.*

Peter is-looking-at the moon at-the through of-the telescope.

‘Peter is looking at the moon through/despite of the telescope’

At first sight, speakers find (2) quite strange (they do not have problem with (1)). But when provided with a context where the telescope forms a visual obstacle to the moon (because it is dirty for instance), they always judge that the acceptability of (2) increases. Great readers generally find the restriction P imposed by the preposition “*au travers de*” by themselves. P says roughly “The telescope acts as a

visual filter the sight must penetrate in order to see the moon” (see Martin & Dominicy 2001a & b for details). P is an adaptation of the more abstract proposition ruling the use of “*au travers de*” (“There is an obstacle to the perception of the object under observation”).

The central questions which will be dealt with are the semantic and epistemic status of P. Clearly, P does not pertain to the truth conditions of the sentence. (2) will be judged true exactly under the same conditions as (1), which does not convey P. P resembles very much a conventional implicature (CI). Indeed, P, like CIs, arises only because of the (non-truth conditional) properties of a word and cannot be explained in terms of conversational rules. P, like CIs, is detachable, since it is possible to denote the same thing without conveying P (see (1)). P, as CIs, survives under presupposition holes, e.g. negation, (like presuppositions).<sup>1</sup> For instance, the utterance of the sentence (4) containing the hole *possibly* commits the speaker to the CIs (5a-b) triggered by *even* exactly as (3). In the same way, P is presumed by the utterance of (6) exactly as for the utterance of (2):

(3) *Even Bill likes Mary.*

(4) *Possibly even Bill likes Mary.*

(5) a. *Other people besides Bill like Mary.*

b. *Of the people under consideration, Bill is the least likely to like Mary.*

(6) *Possibly Peter is looking at the moon au travers du télescope.*

But something revealed by the experience reported above prevents from analyzing P as a CI. Recall that most speakers do not judge (2) grammatical (since telescopes are not conceived as visual obstacle out of the blue) but find it perfect when provided with a context satisfying P. On the contrary, (3) will be judged grammatical even in a context falsifying (5). We explain the spontaneous judgement on the grammaticality of (2) if we conjecture that speakers are not conscious of P, neither as producer or interpreter. If they were indeed, we would expect them to find a context satisfying P by themselves, as for (3) or (4). On this point, P is very different from CIs. The literature is not explicit on it, but it is obvious that CIs are generally not conceived as infraliminar propositions. The fact that CIs are generally consciously interpreted explains why the speaker can use them to convey the main point of the utterance<sup>2</sup> (like conversational implicatures, see Gazdar 1979, 41), which is the case e.g. if he does not want this point to be further discussed, or why CIs can give rise to sarcastic effects (see Karttunen & Peters 1979, hence KP, fn pp. 8-9) – ironizing on the basis of unconscious propositions does not pay very well. Some selectional restrictions of verbs, sometimes classed as CIs (see e.g. KP), sometimes as presuppositions (see e.g. Corblin 2003), can also serve as the main point of the

<sup>1</sup> *Even* has also been analyzed as a presupposition-trigger before and after KP. As the difference between CI and presuppositions does not matter for our line of argumentation, we leave this point apart (see Gazdar 1979 for details).

<sup>2</sup> Potts (t.a. :2) states that CIs are « secondary entailments that cooperative speakers rarely use to express controversial propositions or carry the main themes of a discourse ». Potts seems to neglect here the difference between road regulations and the regularities in drivers' behavior.

utterance or give rise to ironic effects. For instance, one can say *Peter likes Mary* precisely to indicate that Peter is acquainted with Mary, or *I've drunk some cheese* to indicate ironically that the cheese served was really too liquid. This is possible because speakers consciously convey and interpret the selectional restrictions at hand.

The case of "hidden propositions" (cf. Martin 2002, Dominicy & Martin 2003) like *P* is entirely different. As insinuation and suggestion seem to pertain to the deep nature of CIs – a role that cannot be felicitously fulfilled by propositions generally processed unconsciously – we would lose an important generalization in classing propositions as *P* in the set of CIs.

*P* is not a presupposition either, since the utterance of (2) does not require *P* to be true in order for the utterance to have a truth value. Besides, presuppositions can also convey the main point of the utterance (see e.g. at least some kinds of accommodation).

## 2. Viewpoint Propositions

As *P* does not enter any existing category, it seems justified to introduce a new subspecies in the typology of non truth-conditional semantic components of sentences. Before proposing a definition, it is worth emphasizing that items triggering propositions like *P* do not reduce to a handful of prepositions. Actually, they seem to pervade all the lexicon. In order to check that, one only needs to notice the laborious efforts lexicographers dedicate to excavating deep selectional restrictions of words.

I shall say that a sentence containing an item like «au travers de» introduce a *compulsory viewpoint* on its denotatum through a *viewpoint proposition* (VPP). I will loosely say that the sentence containing a viewpoint-trigger like «au travers de» introduces a VPP (obviously, it does not denote it). The sentence does not need to be uttered (in a certain context) in order to introduce its VPP. The VPP denotes a way of representing certain aspects of the denotatum of the sentence; it imposes this viewpoint independently of the subjective representation of the speaker. VPPs do not need a bearer to exist. Other people can obey them in forming their representation of the denotatum as much as the speaker. VPPs determine Platonic stances on the denotatum, social viewpoints that can be embodied or not.

The fact that some semantic components of sentences are not consciously triggered or interpreted is not very surprising. It is common to have a procedural knowledge without having the corresponding propositional knowledge. Speakers can implicitly learn the specific difference of contexts satisfying the introduced VPP, without knowing that the sentence introduces the VPP nor knowing that VPP. Children's utterances illustrate well the point. Everybody has been once confused by the huge gap between the accuracy a child can display while talking about a situation on the one hand, and the implausibility that he can adopt the perspective generally associated with the expression he used on the other. What happens in this case is that the child has formed a generalization upon the use of a given expression on the basis of statistical regularities, and recognizes – rightly or not – an instance as belonging to the type of context which satisfies the expression, but doesn't grasp the corresponding VPP consciously. The enjoyment adults have while attending these events is partly due to the fact that witnessing this gap unveils either what is already there without being

noticed (if the child was right), or what could have been there (if the child was wrong with perspicacity). On this point, children are rightly called poets, since poets often try to bring to light the way words pre-construct the representation of reality. They make notice humdrum and thus invisible perspectives in prolonging and extending them (see e. g. (Jaccottet 2002 [1970], 66) – as a musician holding a note – or in using the lexicon in a deviant way (see e.g. (Eikhenbaum 1965, 62)).

The little experiment reported above suggests that the more well-read the subject is, the more he likely is to grasp the VPPs consciously. As we do not want to say that the meaning of words co-varies with the speaker, we are committed to say that if the VPP is consciously processed by some speakers, it is 'introduced' by the sentence even if the speaker does not know it.

## 3. Do you believe the same thing after having said it?

We may conjecture that when a speaker utters a sentence introducing the VPP *P*, the lexical choices he made, perhaps unconsciously, is caused by, and therefore reflects, his own representation of the state of affairs at hand. However, once a difference is made between the social viewpoint conveyed by the lexicon and the one the speaker entertains as an individual, it is theoretically possible that whereas he introduces *P* unconsciously through its (sincere) utterance of the sentence, he (i) judges *P* false or can discover that *P* is false, or (ii) is agnostic about *P*, or (iii) has no belief about *P*. Let us assume that when *P* is unconsciously introduced, native speakers and interpreters do process it at a certain level – in a deaf, dumb, and blind way. In the case (i), the speaker has expressed itself badly, and consequently can feel helplessly troubled. If the interpreter is also in state (i), he can feel a particularly subdued discomfort: as unconscious propositions cannot be explicitly rejected, the troublesome *P* may pass automatically into his commitment store (cf. Hamblin 1970, Corblin 2003). Cases (ii) and (iii) are the most interesting one. We may conjecture that in choosing (perhaps partially by chance) an item triggering *P*, the speaker, while processing its own utterance, eliminates the representations falsifying *P* he entertains before its utterance (case (ii)) or diminishes the probability to entertain them in the future (case (iii)). This is at least what we expect if the system tends to maximize the consistency between what is (unconsciously) meant and represented. The fact that more generally, verbalization retroacts on thoughts is confirmed by an experience reported in (Schooler & Schooler 1990). This experience shows that verbalizing the appearance of previously seen visual stimuli impaired subsequent recognition performance. Subjects who verbalized the face performed less well on a subsequent recognition test than control subjects who did not engage in memory verbalization. Bartlett already reported that subjects who repeatedly described previously seen face drawings were reportedly surprised by the appearance of the original drawings (reported in Schooler & Schooler 1990, 43). If the truth-conditional aspects of verbalized sentences, which are generally consciously processed by the speaker, already alter memory, we can imagine that unconscious components of sentences can also act (even minimally) upon the viewpoint the speaker has on the denotatum of its memorizing. It might be interesting to consider testimonies on this perspective.

## 4. Conclusions

Why natural languages would be such that parts of the information conveyed by sentences stay beyond the control of the speakers? On the one hand, it seems counter-adaptative indeed, since viewpoints unconsciously triggered can act upon the interaction in a way contrary to the preferences of the speaker. Culture is in this sense an adaptative tool, since it permits the Private Ego to take over its Inconscious or Social Ego, to manipulate better not so well-read Alters (at least if getting rid of beliefs induced unconsciously is more difficult), and to know how not so well-read Alters conceive the world even better than themselves. On the other hand, it can be argued that the existence of a set of unconscious and thus not easily controlled pre-conceptions of the world strengthens social cohesion<sup>3</sup> and puts an ecological limit on inter-individual cheating.

## Bibliography

- Corblin, F. 2003 *Presuppositions and commitment stores*, ms., Paris IV-Sorbonne.
- Dominicy, M. & Martin, F. 2003 "Perspectives et Vérité dans la narration: les propositions cachées", in Gouvard, J.-M., *De la langue au style*, Paris: Champion, to appear.
- Eikhenbaum, B. 1965 "La théorie de la méthode formelle", in Todorov, T. (ed.), *Théorie de la littérature*, Paris: Seuil, 31-75.
- Frege, G. 1892 "On Sense and Nominatum", reprinted in Martinich, A.-P. (ed.), 1996, *The Philosophy of Language*, New-York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 186-198.
- Gazdar, G. 1979 *Pragmatics. Implicature, presupposition and logical form*. London: Academic Press.
- Hamblin, C. 1970 *Fallacies*, London: Methuen.
- Jaccottet, P. 2002 [1970] *Paysages avec figures absentes*, Paris: Poésie/Gallimard.
- Karttunen, L. & Peters, S. 1979 "Conventional Implicature", in Oh, C. & D. Dinneen (eds.), *Syntax & Semantics, Vol. 11: Presupposition*, 1-56.
- Martin, F. 2002 "Dire sans vouloir dire", ms, Université libre de Bruxelles.
- Martin, F., & Dominicy, M. 2001 "A travers, au travers (de) et le point de vue", in Kupferman, L., E. Katz & M. Asnès (eds), *La Préposition dans tous ses états, 1-2, Travaux linguistiques*, 42-43, Duculot, 211-228.
- Martin, F. & Dominicy, M. 2001 Mental States and Truth-conditional Semantics, paper presented to the European Society for Philosophy and Psychology, Fribourg, 8th-11th August 2001.
- Potts, C. 2003 "Conventional Implicatures, a distinguished class of meanings", in Ramchand, G. & C. Reiss, *The Oxford Book of Linguistic Interfaces*, to appear.
- Schooler, J. & Engstler-Schooler, T. 1990 "Verbal Overshadowing of Visual Memories: Some Things Are Better Left Unsaid", *Cognitive Psychology*, 22, 36-71.

---

<sup>3</sup> The problem of VPP is obviously related to the Sapir-Whorf question. It is very likely that the set of VPP buried in the lexicon varies partly from one natural language to another. But as Marc Dominicy notices, the existence of VPPs would raise the same questions even if there was only one natural language.